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ABSTRACT

The pamphlet notes the two types of educational accreditation (institutional and specialized), and describes the purpose and organization of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools and its Commission on Institutions of Higher Education. The four parts of the evaluation process are outlined, and the obligations of affiliation with the Commission are listed. General institutional requirements are presented concerning mission and authorization, educational programs, institutional organization, financial resources, and public disclosure. The four criteria for accreditation and four criteria for "Candidacy for Accreditation" status are discussed, and questions frequently asked of the Commission are answered. (JDD)

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Accreditation of Postsecondary Institutions: An Overview 1990-92

The Commission staff have prepared this pamphlet to provide general information about the accreditation of postsecondary institutions by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

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INTRODUCTION

Voluntary accreditation is a process uniquely American. In the United States, accreditation is voluntarily sought by institutions and is conferred by non-governmental bodies. There are two types of educational accreditation: **institutional** and **specialized.**

Institutional accreditation evaluates an entire institution and accredits it *as a whole.* An institutional accrediting body reviews more than the educational offerings of the institution; it also assesses such characteristics as governance and administration, financial condition, admissions and student personnel processes, institutional resources, and relationships with outside communities. Institutional accreditation is provided by six regional associations of schools and colleges (each named after the region in which it arose—Middle States, New England, North Central, Northwest, Southern, Western); and by several national associations that limit their scope to particular kinds of institutions. While independent of one another, the six regional associations cooperate extensively and recognize one another's accreditation.

Specialized accreditation, also called *program* accreditation, evaluates particular *units, schools, or programs* within an institution. Specialized accreditation is often closely associated with national professional associations, such as those for engineering, medicine, and law.

THE NORTH CENTRAL ASSOCIATION

The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools is a not-for-profit, voluntary, membership organization of elementary, secondary, and postsecondary institutions, founded in 1895, and having interest in the improvement of education through evaluation and accreditation. According to its articles of incorporation:

> The purpose of the association shall be the development and maintenance of high standards of excellence for universities, colleges, and schools, the continued improvement of the educational program and effectiveness of instruction on elementary, secondary, and college levels through a scientific and professional approach to the solution of educational problems, the establishment of cooperative relationships between the schools and colleges and universities within the territory of the association, and the maintenance of effective working relationships with other educational organizations and accrediting agencies.

The Association serves colleges and schools in nineteen states—Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming—and the American Dependents' Schools operated overseas for the children of American military and civilian personnel.

The Association is organized into two Commissions:

- The **Commission on Schools,** with regional offices in Tempe, Arizona, accredits institutions below the postsecondary level. This Commission works extensively through state committees throughout the region.
- The **Commission on Institutions of Higher Education,** with regional offices in Chicago, Illinois, accredits postsecondary institutions.

The Board of Directors of the North Central Association consists of the officers of the Association and the members of the boards of its two Commissions.

THE COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Mission of the Commission

The mission of the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, as adopted on January 21, 1980, states:

> The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, a component of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, is an organization of those member institutions of the Association accredited by the Commission. These institutions are joined together for two fundamental purposes:
>
> 1. To establish and apply criteria for the accreditation of postsecondary educational institutions;
> 2. To assist affiliated institutions in the improvement of their educational programs and related activities.
>
> ... In addition to conducting the accreditation process, the Commission in furtherance of its fundamental purposes
>
> 1. Regularly monitors institutions affiliated with it, both to ascertain that they continue to achieve their avowed purposes and to become aware of ways in which the Commission can assist them in improving their effectiveness;

2. Maintains a continuing relationship with other groups concerned with accreditation and educational improvement, especially the schools;
3. Subjects its criteria and procedures for accreditation to continuing study to be sure they represent the best theory and practice of institutional accreditation and are responsive to the educational needs of society;
4. Provides reasonable and appropriate public information about the institutions affiliated with the Commission;
5. Provides assistance to affiliated but unaccredited institutions to assist them in fulfilling the requirements of accreditation;
6. Studies, and assists others to study, current issues in postsecondary education bearing on the maintenance and improvement of educational institutions;
7. Prepares and disseminates publications, provides counsel, and conducts meetings directed at the improvement of postsecondary education;
8. Promotes the self-regulation of institutions by requiring or recommending good practices for the conduct of institutional activities.

The Personnel of the Commission

The Commission's work is conducted by several groups:

- A full-time staff in the Commission office responds to inquiries and provides assistance to institutions and to evaluation teams both during the self-study and evaluation processes for initial or continued status and after the evaluation through Annual Reports, institutional change processes, and other types of counsel and monitoring.
- A corps of more than 700 **Consultant-Evaluators,** selected for their experience and expertise from all types of accredited institutions throughout the North Central region, make up the members of evaluation teams that conduct the site visits.
- A special group of Consultant-Evaluators serve as **Accreditation Review Council Members** and participate in the review processes of the Commission, the next step in the evaluation process following the team visit.
- Fifteen persons called **Commissioners** compose the decision and policy making body of the Commission. Twelve come from accredited institutions, and three are representative of the public. Commissioners have responsibility for decisions on the accreditation of institutions, for the formulation of Commission policies, and for the oversight of Commission operations. The person elected by the Commission to serve as NCA Vice-President/President serves as an ex-officio member of the Commission.

The Commission offers an extensive variety of programs and services to all its institutions. Its publications and its Annual Meeting are a major part of that effort. To inform all its constituencies, the Commission publishes a variety of materials on self-study, evaluation, and institutional improvement, including a series of three publications describing the policies and procedures for the accreditation process, a regular newsletter, two editions of the Association's quarterly journal, and various other documents and articles. (See page 15 for a list of publications available from the Commission.) The Commission also conducts an extensive program on self-study, evaluation, and institutional improvement for institutions, Consultant-Evaluators, and others as a part of the Annual Meeting of the North Central Association held in early spring in Chicago.

Forms of Affiliation

Postsecondary educational institutions may be affiliated with the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, and through it with the North Central Association, in either of two ways: one is as an **accredited** institution; the other is as a **candidate** institution. Both affiliations are voluntary. There are currently more than 950 institutions affiliated with the Commission.

The Evaluation Process: An Overview

The Commission's process of evaluation for both initial and continued accreditation has been formulated to determine whether an institution meets the General Institutional Requirements (GIRs) and the Criteria for Accreditation (see pages 10-13). It may be divided into four parts.

- First, the institution undertakes a self-study aimed at examining how it meets the GIRs and the Criteria. The results of the self-examination are summarized in a Self-Study Report which forms the basis for the Commission's evaluation. The completed Self-Study Report constitutes the institution's formal application for initial or continued accreditation.

- Second, the institution is visited by a team of Consultant-Evaluators appointed by the Commission. This team gathers comprehensive information about the institution and summarizes its findings in a written Team Report. The report assesses whether the institution satisfies the GIRs and the Criteria, offers advice and suggestions for improvement, and concludes with a formal recommendation for accreditation action. The institution has an opportunity to make a formal written response to the team's report and recommendation.

- Third, the Self-Study Report and the Team Report are reviewed by a Readers' Panel and/or by a Review Committee which meets with representatives of the institution and the team. If the review process produces suggested changes in the recommendation of the team, the institution and the team have an opportunity to respond in writing.

- Fourth, all recommendations (and appropriate responses) are considered by the Commission which takes official action on the institution's accreditation.

The evaluation process for initial and continued candidacy includes the same four parts.

Obligations of Affiliation

In addition to meeting the General Institutional Requirements and the Criteria for Accreditation or Candidacy, all affiliated institutions voluntarily agree to meet *obligations of affiliation*, including periodic review, payment of dues and fees, and making reports—including an Annual Report—as requested by the Commission.

Every institution must have its accreditation reaffirmed not later than five years after it has been initially granted, and not later than ten years following each subsequent reaffirmation. North Central accreditation is not for a specific period of time but is a continuing relationship between the institution and the Association which is subject to periodic review. Therefore, the timing of the next comprehensive evaluation specified in the accreditation action of the Commission is subject to alteration if significant changes occur in an institution between evaluations. Focused visits or reports may be required between comprehensive visits, and Annual Reports and other information from institutions are regularly examined to see whether changes have occurred (or are anticipated) that would necessitate a different time for the next evaluation. In addition, institutions are required to notify the Commission before initiating any change that might alter their relationship with the Commission and to obtain approval of the change before initiating it. Thus, while Commission policy dictates that every institution must be evaluated at least once every ten years, many institutions are evaluated more frequently. Candidate institutions are evaluated biennially.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS FREQUENTLY ASKED OF THE COMMISSION

What good is institutional accreditation?

For members of the public—and especially prospective students of an institution—the institutional accreditation provided by North Central denotes that the accredited institution has been found to be operating at generally satisfactory levels with reasonable grounds for believing that it will continue to do so. Reaching this conclusion requires that an institution open itself to outside examination conducted by qualified persons using accepted criteria. For the accredited institution the process of accreditation provides opportunity for searching self-examination leading to improvement in quality, and for consultation and advice from persons from other institutions. Thus accreditation provides public certification of acceptable institutional quality and an opportunity and incentive for institutional self-improvement.

Is there a difference between regional accreditation and state licensure?

Yes. Most states have established regulations that must be met before an institution can operate. Such regulations represent a minimum basis for protection of students. Accreditation builds upon such minimum legal requirements. In some states accreditation may be used to satisfy requirements for continued operation as an educational institution. However, accreditation is different and separate from the legal authority to operate and confer degrees.

Does the Commission rank colleges?

No. Colleges and universities differ from one another so much in program variety and students to be served that no valid general ranking of institutions is possible. Rankings may be prepared based on specific numerical details (size,

tuition, endowment), but these rankings have at best a distant relationship to educational quality. The important issue for each student is whether the college meets the student's needs. While accreditation does not provide a basis for ranking accredited institutions, it does seek to establish a level of acceptable quality for all accredited institutions.

Can the Commission recommend a college to a student?

No. Selection of a college to attend is a decision that must be made individually. There are so many different types of institutions (small, large, single-program, multiple-program, urban, rural, public, private, etc.) that matching the student's interests and abilities to the characteristics of a college needs detailed information about the student. Information about colleges is found in various books and directories (available in many libraries), and students are advised to consult with counselors or advisors in secondary schools. The admissions officers of colleges are often able to provide assistance, although they will have most knowledge of the institution they represent. The public information available from the Commission is limited to that describing the institution's status with the Commission.

Does accreditation of an institution mean that a program offered by that institution is an "accredited program?"

No. Institutional accreditation speaks to the general quality of the institution without making judgments about specific programs; while programs are examined during institutional accreditation, specific standards of curriculum and course content are not applied. Institutional accreditation is accreditation of the *whole* institution, including all programs and sites. The accreditation of individual programs, such as those preparing for the practice of a profession, is different from institutional accreditation and is carried out by "specialized" or "program" accrediting bodies.

The Commission does not maintain lists of programs offered by its accredited institutions. Each specialized accrediting body publishes a list of programs accredited by it, and this information is also shown in the annual directory, *Accredited Institutions of Postsecondary Education* (available in many libraries).

For further information about institutional and specialized accreditation (including names and addresses of accrediting bodies) write or call:

Council on Postsecondary Accreditation
One Dupont Circle, N.W., Suite 305
Washington D. C. 20036
(202) 452-1433

Does accreditation guarantee that credits and degrees can be transferred to another institution?

No. Transferability of credits and degrees is a matter determined by the institution receiving the credits. It rests on several factors: the institution at which credits or degrees were earned; how well the credits offered for transfer mesh with the curriculum the student wishes to pursue; how well the student did in the courses. Accreditation speaks to only the first of these factors, and therefore cannot by itself guarantee transfer of credits; however, an institution may choose to accept in transfer credits from only accredited institutions, so that transfer of credits from an unaccredited institution may be excluded. Some institutions have specific agreements with other institutions guaranteeing transfer of credits, but students should be skeptical of unqualified assertions that credits will transfer. Anyone planning to transfer credits should consult with the receiving institution about the transfer at the earliest opportunity—before taking the courses for transfer, if possible.

Who evaluates the Commission?

The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation is a national organization that provides recognition of accrediting bodies. COPA evaluates each accrediting body against a set of "Provisions for Recognition." The Provisions set forth an extensive list of requirements describing accepted practices in accreditation; COPA-recognized accrediting bodies must be reevaluated at least every five years.

The U. S. Secretary of Education maintains a list of accrediting bodies determined by the Secretary to be "reliable authorities as to the quality of training offered by educational institutions and programs." To appear on the list an accrediting body must demonstrate its compliance with a series of criteria established by the Secretary. A reconsideration of status on the list is conducted approximately every four years. The Secretary's list serves as a basis of eligibility for participation in federally-funded programs, including student financial aid.

The Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association has been recognized by COPA

since 1975 (when COPA was formed), and listed by the Secretary of Education (or a predecessor officer) since 1952 (when the first list was published). Through its own committees, the Commission continually assesses the effectiveness of its policies and procedures.

How does the Commission respond to complaints against affiliated institutions?

In fulfilling its responsibility to the public, the Commission receives complaints about its affiliated institutions. The Commission has a policy that defines how the Commission will handle all complaints that it receives.

- **The Commission cannot adjudicate individual complaints.** Most complaints that the Commission receives involve individual grievances with an institution. Examples of individual grievances might include: a problem with a faculty member; a misunderstanding regarding admission or degree requirements; a dispute regarding tuition payment or reimbursement. The Commission cannot settle a dispute between an individual and an institution, nor can it determine whether an individual grievance against an institution is legitimate. When staff determines that a complaint is an individual grievance, it informs the complainant but agrees upon receipt of the complainant's permission to forward a copy of the complaint to the institution. The institution will not be asked to respond to the Commission, the complaint will not be forwarded to the Commissioners, and no official action will be taken regarding the complaint. The Commission encourages those with individual grievances with an institution to attempt to resolve them through the institution's established grievance processes.

- **The Commission will investigate complaints that raise significant aquestions about the institution's ability to meet the Commission's Criteria for Accreditation or Candidacy.** In some cases, serious complaints may arise that appear to question an institution's compliance with North Central requirements. On occasion the Commission has received a series of common complaints about an institution and/or has received public documents (articles, advertising, etc.) that support these complaint(s). The Commission will forward complaints of this nature to the institution with the complainant's permission and will require a response. The Commission may provide confidentiality for the complainant, if requested. Should Commission staff conclude that the institution's response is inadequate, they may share the complaint(s) with the Commissioners. Complaints that receive review by the Commissioners will be shared with the next evaluation team that visits the institution.

- **To receive consideration from the Commission, a complaint must be in writing and should be addressed to the Commission.** The Commission will not respond to complaints addressed to other parties but copied to the Commission.

GENERAL INSTITUTIONAL REQUIREMENTS

An institution affiliated with the Commission by either accreditation or candidacy must demonstrate that it meets the following **General Institutional Requirements:**

MISSION AND AUTHORIZATION

1.a. The institution has formally adopted and made public its statement of mission.

1.b. The statement of mission is appropriate to an institution of higher education.

1.c. The institution confers certificates, diplomas or degrees.

1.d. The institution has legal authority to confer its certificates, diplomas and degrees.

1.e. The institution meets all legal requirements to operate wherever it conducts activities.

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

2.a. The educational programs are compatible with the institution's mission.

2.b. The principal educational programs are based on recognized fields of study at the postsecondary level.

2.c. At least one of the undergraduate programs is two or more academic years in length (or the equivalent). If no undergraduate programs are offered, at least one of the graduate programs is one or more academic years in length (or the equivalent).

2.d. General education at the postsecondary level is an essential element of undergraduate degree programs and a prerequisite to graduate degree programs.

2.e. General education and/or a program of related instruction at the postsecondary level is an essential element of undergraduate certificate and diploma programs two or more academic years in length.

2.f. The certificate, diploma or degree awarded upon successful completion of an educational program is appropriate to the demonstrated attainment of the graduate.

INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION

3.a. There is a governing board, legally responsible for the institution, which establishes and regularly reviews basic policies that govern the institution and protect its integrity.

3.b. The governing board includes individuals who represent the public interest. (*Note:* In rare situations the Commission may approve alternative means by which the interests of the public are appropriately represented when unusual circumstances prohibit public representatives on the board.)

3.c. An executive officer is designated by the governing board to administer the institution.

3.d. A faculty comprising persons qualified by education and experience is significantly involved in the development and review of the educational programs.

3.e. Admissions policies are consistent with the institution's mission and appropriate to the educational programs.

3.f. Admissions practices conform to the admission's policies.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

4.a. The institution has financial resources sufficient to support its activities.

4.b. The institution has its financial statements externally audited on a regular schedule by a certified public accountant or state audit agency.

PUBLIC DISCLOSURE

5.a. The institution publishes in its catalog or other appropriate places accurate information that fairly describes

i. its educational programs,

ii. its policies and procedures directly affecting students,
iii. its charges and its refund policies,
iv. the academic credentials of its faculty members and administrators.

5.b. The institution makes available upon request accurate information that fairly describes its financial resources.

THE CRITERIA FOR ACCREDITATION

In addition to the General Institutional Requirements, an institution seeking accreditation by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education, must demonstrate that it satisfies each of the following **Criteria for Accreditation:**

1. The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes, consistent with its mission and appropriate to a postsecondary educational institution.

Each of the other Criteria is related to this fundamental one which embodies the Commission's philosophy of judging an institution on the basis of its own purposes.

2. The institution has effectively organized adequate human, financial and physical resources into educational and other programs to accomplish its purposes.

Judging that an institution meets this Criterion requires detailed information—about trustees, administrators, faculty, staff, students and the community; about the educational program; about the institution's financial condition; about its facilities—and careful study of how the institution's resources are deployed and administered to make accomplishment of its purposes feasible.

3. The institution is accomplishing its purposes.

Assessing institutional and educational effectiveness is crucial to a determination that this Criterion is met. This Criterion does not prescribe any single methodology to accomplish this task; a variety may apply. But it does prescribe that an accredited institution has developed and is applying measures that provide evidence that it is, in fact, accomplishing its purposes. Documentation of institutional effectiveness must include the assessment of educational outcomes of student achievement.

4. The institution can continue to accomplish its purposes.

If accreditation is to serve both educators and the public, it is necessary to make predictions about the strength and stability

of institutions. While accreditation cannot guarantee that an institution will always remain strong, it represents the best judgment at the time of the evaluation about the institution's prospects for the future. The institution's plans for improvement resulting from its self-assessment are an important element in detemining whether this Criterion is met.

While the Criteria are intentionally general, the judgments concerning them are founded on careful and detailed examination of the specifics of the institution. Their generality ensures that accreditation decisions focus on the particulars of each institution's own purposes, rather than on trying to make institutions fit into a pre-established mold. The widely different purposes and scopes of educational institutions demand that the criteria by which an institutional body makes its judgments be broad enough to encompass, if not encourage, innovation yet clear enough to assure acceptable quality.

An institution being evaluated for accreditation must have students actively pursuing its programs at the time of the team visit. It also must have graduated at least one class of students prior to Commission action. If the institution has graduated its first class not more that one year before the Commission's evaluation, the effective date of accreditation will be the date of graduation of that first class.

THE CRITERIA FOR CANDIDACY FOR ACCREDITATION

Candidate for Accreditation status indicates that an institution meets the Commission's Criteria for Candidacy and appears to be progressing toward accreditation. Candidacy provides an institution with the opportunity to establish a formal, publicly-recognized relationship with the Association, and is the recommended approach to seeking accreditation for most non-affiliated institutions. Candidacy is a pre-accreditation status and, unlike accredited status, does not carry with it membership in the Commission and the Association. Candidacy does not automatically assure eventual accreditation. Accreditation status is not retroactive.

The Criteria for Candidacy are closely related to the Criteria for Accreditation since they are meant to provide candidate institutions with a foundation for logical development toward accreditation. In addition to the General Institutional Requirements, an institution seeking candidacy with the Commission must demonstrate that it satisfies each of the following **Criteria for Candidacy for Accreditation:**

1. **The institution has clear and publicly stated purposes, consistent with its mission and appropriate to a postsecondary educational institution.**

   This Criterion is identical to the first Criterion for Accreditation, since every institution affiliated with the Commission must have at least such purposes.

2. **The institution has effectively organized adequate human, financial and physical resources into educational and other programs so that it is accomplishing its immediate purposes.**

   This Criterion differs from the second Criterion for Accreditation in that it speaks of a candidate's accomplishing its immediate purposes. The difference is meant to acknowledge that a candidate is not yet fully developed to the point at which it has the ability to accomplish all of its purposes. However, while the wording of this Criterion limits attention to immediate purposes, it requires actual accomplishment, thereby including elements of Criteria Two and Three for Accreditation with respect to immediate purposes.

3. **The institution is following realistic plans to acquire and organize any additional resources needed to accomplish all of its stated purposes.**

   This Criterion directs attention to the candidate's plans for development over the candidacy period. It requires that the candidate demonstrate that it has conducted a self-study, has identified areas of strength and concern, and has done and will continue to do the necessary planning—for students, faculty, staff, curriculum, financial, physical, and other development—so that it can realistically be expected to accomplish all of its stated purposes within that period.

4. **The institution has the potential to achieve accreditation within the candidacy period.**

   In making this judgment, the candidate's present condition, its plans and its timetable for developing to the point where it meets the Criteria for Accreditation must be examined. Candidacy is of limited duration, and the Commission seeks to determine through this Criterion that the candidate's current plans are likely to allow it to achieve accreditation within this period.

An institution being evaluated for candidacy must have students actively pursuing its programs at the time of the team visit.

An institution continues its candidacy for accreditation for a fixed period of time—usually no longer than six years—until it fulfills the Criteria for Accreditation or its affiliation with the Commission is terminated.

PUBLICATIONS AVAILABLE FROM THE COMMISSION

The following publications can be ordered from the Commission's Chicago office:

A Handbook of Accreditation. This document provides an overview of the Commission's accreditation process and a brief history of how that process has evolved. $4.00.

A Guide to Self-Study for Commission Evaluation. This document provides assistance to institutions preparing for Commission evaluation as they organize and conduct their self-study processes and report the results. $4.00.

A Manual for the Evaluation Visit. This document provides general information about the evaluation visit. $4.00.

NCA Quarterly. The Spring issue of this publication provides the directory of affiliated postsecondary institutions; the Summer issue provides the list of affiliated elementary and secondary schools; the Fall issue features articles of particular interest to persons in higher education; the Winter issue includes articles of particular interest to persons in elementary and secondary schools. Spring issue: $4.00. Summer issue: $5.00. Fall issue: $3.00. Winter issue: $3.00.

A Collection of Papers on Self-Study and Institutional Improvement. This publication includes papers from CIHE Annual Meeting programs that provide advice and suggestions on self-study and address a wide variety of topics related to accreditation and institutional improvement. $10.00.

Briefing. This Commission newsletter is published three times each year. The November issue includes a special insert on the upcoming Annual Meeting. *Briefing* is an invaluable resources for institutions and evaluators who need to be informed of Commission activities. Subscription : $10.00/year.

Accreditation of Postsecondary Institutions: An Overview. This pamphlet provides general information about the accreditation of postsecondary institutions by the Commission on Institutions of Higher Education of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. $1.00.

Guidelines on International Education Programs. The following working documents have been developed by Commission staff to assist institutions and teams in planning and evaluating new international education ventures: "Guidelines for Good Practice in Overseas International Education Programs for Non-U.S. Nationals" and "A Practical Guide for Organizing and Conducting International Evaluation Visits." No charge. Limit: one set.

Prices subject to change.

For futher information about the North Central Association, write or call the appropriate Commission office.

For elementary and secondary schools:

Commission on Schools
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools
c/o Arizona State University
Tempe AZ 85287-3011

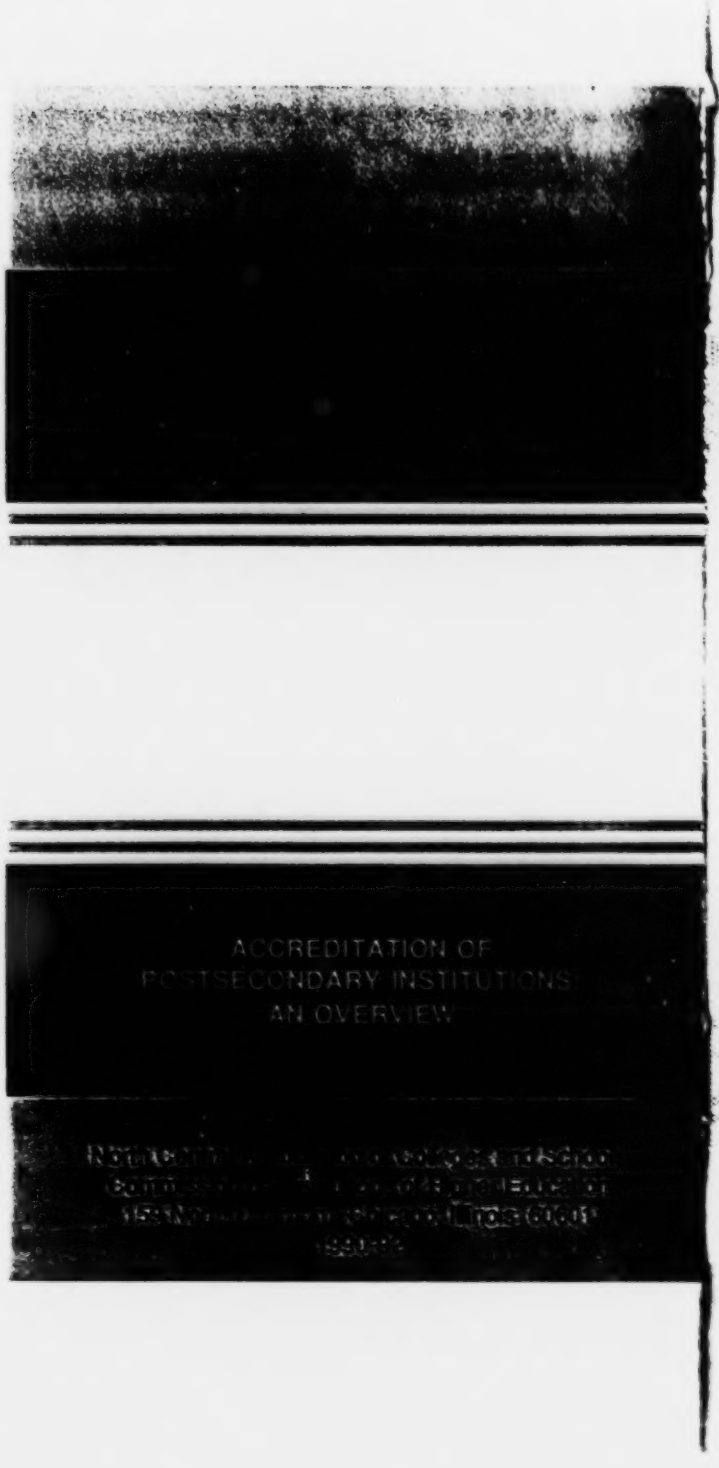
800/525-9517 (toll-free outside Arizona)
or 602/965-8700

For postsecondary institutions:

Commission on Institutions of Higher Education
North Central Ascociation of Colleges and Schools
159 N. Dearborn
Chicago IL 60601

800/621-7440 (toll-free outside Illinois)
or 312/263-0456

FAX: 312/263-7462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